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SUBJECT: BRV PREPARING NEW SOCIALIST CURRICULUM: DETAILS TBD

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) recently released for selective comment a new 500-page curriculum designed to reinforce President Chavez' ill-defined "Socialism in the XXI Century." The BRV is planning to make new government textbooks available in December and implement the new curriculum beginning in the 2007-2008 school year. Education Minister Adan Chavez maintains the new curriculum will teach Venezuelan students to think more critically. The opposition believes the values and social science components of the curriculum will constitute socialist indoctrination. Although teachers unions, education associations, and the Catholic Church are all publicly expressing concerns about the BRV's proposal, the overall reaction of Venezuelan parents has been surprisingly muted. There may be greater reaction when the BRV's abstract education reform ideas are actually put in practice. End Summary.

The New Bolivarian Education

¶2. (SBU) Adan Chavez, Education Minister and brother of the Venezuelan president, is leading efforts to revise the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV's) K-12 curriculum (Ref A). The Education Ministry circulated a 500-page curriculum for comment among BRV-selected educators. The proposal is largely theoretical and is not accompanied by concrete examples of classroom materials. The Education Ministry is also preparing a series of new textbooks that it plans to make available free to schools starting in December. President Hugo Chavez is calling the 2007-2008 school year the "year of consolidation of the Bolivarian Education System" when the curriculum will be tested selectively. The BRV intends to implement this new curriculum across the board starting with the 2008-2009 school year. During his September 30 "Alo, Presidente" broadcast, President Chavez threatened to take over private schools and imprison school directors who refuse to adopt the new curriculum.

¶3. (SBU) During a nationally-broadcast September 17 morning visit to a new elementary school in Anzoategui State, President Chavez reviewed the "four pillars" of the new system: to create, to participate and coexist, to value, and to reflect. The Venezuelan stressed that the new curriculum

would transform "a set of capitalist values" into "values centered on the human being." He said the new curriculum would promote solidarity, respect, equality, honesty, love, and loyalty (and eschew selfishness and individualism). Lambasting at length his childhood history books' treatment of the colonial era, Chavez also stressed that the new curriculum would transcend "Euro-centrism."

14. (SBU) Chavez also explained the four axes of the new curriculum: the environment and integrated health, values, communication and information technologies, and "liberating" work. Chavez said schools should be much more open to their surrounding communities and serve as models of organization. The new curriculum will also reportedly create formal links between schools and BRV social missions. Chavez said schools will impart the value of work, and secondary schools will be expected to organize community anti-poverty projects. He also cautioned that "English is not the only necessary (foreign) language."

15. (SBU) The BRV started training public school teachers in the new curriculum during the summer of 2007. These sessions are largely ideology-imparting sessions similar to the BRV's ongoing "Morality and Enlightenment" public education campaigns. They reportedly focus on the writings of Venezuelan founder Simon Bolivar, Bolivar's tutor and Minister of Education Simon Rodriguez, and mid-19th century land reforming military leader Ezequiel Zamora. The opposition-oriented Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) complains that teachers are required to attend the training session outside normal working hours without compensation.

Muted Civil Society Reaction

16. (C) Public reaction to the BRV's education reform plans

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has so far been surprisingly tame. Octavio De Lamo, President of the Private Education Chamber, told Polcouns September 21 that his organization has set up phone trees at private schools that mobilize parents whenever Education Ministry officials pay inspection visits at private schools. De Lamo noted that BRV officials are far less inclined to conduct intrusive inspections when confronted by groups of parents. De Lamo said he is reluctant to be too critical of the proposed reform because he fears the BRV may be putting out some misinformation to bait its opponents. He also said many private school administrators are still in denial, hoping that many of the proposed changes will never be implemented.

17. (C) Yanet Fermin, leader of one of the teachers unions in Nueva Esparta state, told poloff that a "culture of conformism" prevails among public school teachers. She noted that the BRV has flouted existing regulations to designate a significant number of Chavez loyalists as "interim" school directors. According to Fermin and opposition activists, these directors act as political commissars: teachers must either go along or risk losing their jobs. In addition, the Ministry of Education has provided early retirement to many experienced teachers eager to leave the politicized educational system and is preparing many new teachers at parallel Bolivarian teacher training colleges.

18. (SBU) The educational NGO Education Assembly, which a few years ago helped organize street demonstrations against earlier proposed school reforms, is giving the new curriculum mixed reviews. Education Assembly President Olga Ramos believes the proposed curriculum distorts Venezuelan history by exalting Simon Bolivar and Chavez' "Bolivarian Revolution" and gives scant attention to the consolidation of democracy after 1958. Ramos also criticizes the reform for introducing militarism into the schools by stressing the need for young people to prepare to defend Venezuela against "external and

internal" enemies. At the same time, Ramos praises that the proposed curriculum for what she believes is a long overdue reform of the middle school curriculum and renewed emphasis on interdisciplinary learning.

¶9. (C) The reaction of Catholic Church officials to the new curriculum has been guarded. Caracas Auxiliary Bishop Nicolas Bermudez recently told the media that the Church does not object to exposing students to political theories such as Marxism-Leninism, but does object to indoctrinating students.

Other bishops, however, continue to be outspoken in their criticism of BRV education reform. While the new curriculum does not mention religious instruction, Bishop Bermudez said the current Education Law and the Constitution provide juridical protection of the Church's role in public and private education. Private Education Chamber President De Lamo said the Church is likely to let his organization take the lead in criticizing the new curriculum so as not to jeopardize existing state subsidies for Catholic schools and teachers. State education subsidies to the Church have declined in recent years.

Comment

¶10. (C) BRV officials are moving slowly on education reform largely because they anticipated widespread parental objections to what would be perceived as government attempts to indoctrinate students. The surprisingly muted civil society reaction to the slow roll-out of a new curriculum may be due to the fact that the proposed new curriculum has not been implemented in schools as yet. For most Venezuelans, it remains abstract. Moreover, Chavez' proposal to make sweeping changes to the 1999 Constitution is grabbing far more media attention. Parents may pay more attention once they perceive concrete changes in their children's' schools. The BRV release of new textbooks in December, for example, may elicit a stronger public reaction, depending on content. Previous BRV education reform proposals prompted street protests only a few years ago and forced the BRV to back off enacting new education legislation. Education associations make no claim to such street power now.

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